



**Peninsula Community  
Health Services of Alaska**

MEDICAL • DENTAL • BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

230 East Marydale Avenue • Soldotna, Alaska • 99669 • [www.pchsak.org](http://www.pchsak.org)

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November 8, 2016

The Honorable Senator Murkowski  
709 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Senator Sullivan  
702 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Congressman Young  
2314 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Murkowski, Senator Sullivan, and Congressman Young,

We are writing to ask for your support ensuring Alaskans continue to have access to affordable broadband telehealth services in rural and Bush communities. The Rural Health Care Universal Service Support budget has remained static for 20 years and must be increased. The current \$400 million budget remains at the initial level set in 1997, despite inflation, advances in technology and increased demand for services. The FCC expects that demand may exceed the cap for the first time in funding year 2016. An equivalent budget today, adjusted for inflation, would be about \$600 million.

Rural Health Care Universal Service Support is essential to enable providers to deliver affordable broadband telehealth services in Alaska's rural and Bush communities. Alaska received more than \$82 million in rural health care support for 2015, a substantial increase from 2014. Alaska has some of the highest overall utility rates and that is true for telecommunication and internet service as well, so the support is critical to keep down the high cost of healthcare.

If rural Alaskans are to continue to receive the affordable broadband telehealth services they need, the FCC must increase the rural health care budget and index it for inflation, as it recently did with E-rate for schools and libraries. The FCC has updated the E-rate budget from \$2.25 billion in 1997 to \$3.94 billion for 2016, and indexed it for inflation, reflecting increases in demand. Rural healthcare needs a comparable increase.

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Rural health care support enables telehealth services to be provided that dramatically improve access to care, accelerate diagnosis and treatment, avoid unnecessary medivacs, and expand local treatment options. The need for telecommunications and internet service has also grown over the past several years, with CMS requiring electronic health records and meaningful use to obtain incentives and avoid penalties. Our healthcare practitioners, as well as patients, have come to expect that their prescriptions are transmitted electronically and that their medical imaging is instantly accessible.

In recent years the Rural Health Care program has added new programs. First the Healthcare Connect Fund, which gives a flat 65% discount for broadband expenses was added. Now the eligibility is going to be expanded to include Skilled Nursing Facilities starting in 2017. The additional competition for funding beyond the initial Telecommunications Program has not been met with additional funding. We are now facing situations where our current multi-year contracts which had previously been awarded full funding will now need to compete with all new requests and may not be funded in full, although contracts and budgets were put in place with set dollar values.

We have attached some comments from our providers, who work so hard in our patient centered medical home to accomplish our mission of strengthening our community by providing accessible, affordable health care and who support our core values of innovative, comprehensive, integrated care for the whole person.

We ask that you urge the FCC to increase the rural health care universal service support budget, index it for inflation, and provide for any unused funds to be carried forward to future funding years. This will ensure Alaska's rural and Bush communities continue to have access to affordable broadband telehealth services, critical for improving access to care.

Thank you for your support.



Albert E. Wall  
Chief Executive Officer

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CC:  
FCC Secretary and staff

## Statements from our providers:

*Colette Reah, MD*

Medical Provider - Kenai Medical

Having high speed internet access, I am able to access the hospital medical server remotely. For my patients who are hospitalized, I am able to view critical results quickly and order remotely interventions in a timely manner. Last week, I was able to easily track the progress of labor for a mom prior to delivery of my newborn patient which saved multiple phone calls to the nursery. This also gives me the ability to appropriately plan around my scheduled patients and in a timely way notifies my office staff of the anticipated time I need to leave to take care of an impending delivery with complications requiring my attendance. This is pretty big for me since our PCHS Kenai office is a 25-30 minute drive to the hospital. This saves multiple phone calls between my office and the nursery and avoids a surprise call where I need to leave and travel to the hospital for an Emergency while affecting the care of my office patients without reasonable or timely notification.

*Carlos A. Valenzuela, ANP, FNP-BC*

Interim Medical Director

Family Nurse Practitioner-Medical

I am writing on behalf of my patients and employer to discuss the positive impact of high speed internet access on my current patient care. At our community health center, we serve a significant population with complex medical and psychosocial issues that require immediate evaluation and interventions. With high speed internet, I am able to access our secured electronic health record and review large volumes of relevant patient clinical history, medications, and diagnostic reports. I am able to immediately respond to patient and clinical issues which then results in delivery of high quality care. For example with high speed internet, I am able to remotely access our electronic health record, review lab results and reports from a remote location. I am then able to contact my patients and make further recommendations without any delay. Without this vital technology, I would not be able to efficiently manage this data by any other means. I hope that you continue to provide this support for the Rural Health Care Universal Service Support to allow our community health center to access our services.